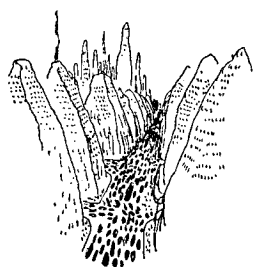

NOTES & TOPICS

Letter from New York

Explaining Ourselves



ALL of a sudden, some of my best friends are "socialists." (I'll explain those inverted commas very shortly.) This is a new phenomenon among New York "intellectuals." (I'll *not* explain those inverted commas—after all, I have to live with these people.) At three successive cocktail parties I have heard various men of letters roundly proclaim that they have lapsed into socialism, and that so far from experiencing an "end of ideology" they were conscious of a new beginning. No one fainted at these announcements; to tell the truth no one paid much heed. But I call this development to your attention so that you'll know what is *chic* with us, and also because aberrations may sometimes tell us more about the norm than can the norm itself.

I use the word "aberration" advisedly, but with no desire to be unusually malicious. I am myself not a socialist, and can't honestly begin to understand what it might mean to be a socialist in the United States, *anno* 1961, where the Government Post Office is a daily scandal while the privately-owned (though publicly-regulated) telephone system is a model for all the world. Nor are my friends of much help in enlightening me. For at least some of the more middle-aged among them (to put the matter delicately), socialism seems to be a moral equivalent for adultery—a last desperate flight from the respectability that comes with rising incomes and falling hair. Most of these people are profoundly a-political; they have visited Paris far more frequently than Washington; their ignorance of economics, or public administration, or foreign affairs is vast. Their socialism is little more than a nostalgic posture, and my own feeling is that, if this is the price one must pay for preserving the sanctity of their families, it is reasonably cheap.

But such people are not the whole story. For among the young in body, as well as in heart, there are scattered symptoms of a radical revival.

It is evident in the rash of little Left-wing magazines that have broken out in the colleges. It is perceptible, too, in the pages of such a magazine as *Commentary*, which under its new editor (aged 31) has encouraged younger contributors with a dissenting cast of mind. It was in *Commentary* that a young professor recently wrote an article calling (favourable) attention to the "rebellious young scholars" who are now openly challenging the conventional wisdom (liberal or neo-liberal, usually) of their teachers. This article certainly exaggerates the proportions of its subject—the overwhelming majority of American students still have only one thing on their minds. But it is not entirely fanciful. There may be no thunder on the Left; but there are some barely audible rumblings.

I HAVE BEEN READING some of these new student publications—*New University Thought*, *Studies on the Left*, etc.—and I do not recommend that you rush to enter your subscriptions. None of them comes close to the level of your own *New Left Review*, which does after all have a genuine socialist tradition to work within. True, when an issue is nice and simple, such as supporting Negro students in the South in their campaign of civil disobedience against segregated schools, movie houses, and restaurants, these young radicals speak decisively as well as fervently. But the struggle against racial discrimination in this country is not a Left-wing property; the affluent foundations, the political machines in the Northern cities, the educated class as a whole, are all on the same side. And when these young people stray into other, and more deeply troubled waters, they flounder wildly. They are against the arms race, but are not for unilateral disarmament either; they object to "Yankee imperialism" but can't seriously admire Dr. Castro; they are pro-Israel (many of them are Jewish) and also pro-Nasser (all of them are "anti-colonialist"); they are for friendly relations with the Soviet Union but cannot really bring themselves to admire a régime that is so patently illiberal. So, more often than not, they exhaust their spleen by constructing vague and grand demonologies in which "the ruling élite" is denounced for so mucking up the world that a decent radical has the greatest difficulty in making sense of it.

Basically, these young people are trapped in a peculiarly American dilemma: how to be a radical without becoming a crank. This is not a uniquely Left-wing problem; it holds for Right-wing radicalism as well. Concurrent with the "socialist" ripples on the campus there has also been a "conservative" revival of sorts. (Once again, those inverted commas are indispensable.)

In the last election, a poll showed the faculty of Princeton University voting overwhelmingly for Kennedy, the students almost as overwhelmingly for Nixon; the new president of Harvard's student council is an avowed "conservative"; organisations with titles like the *Intercollegiate Society of Individualists* or *Young Americans for Freedom* are active and influential; etc. *Time* magazine regularly keeps us informed of goings-on in this group—but, significantly, does so in a tone that keeps them at arm's length. For *Time*, a mass circulation magazine, must necessarily keep within the mainstream of American life. And "conservatism" is no more in this mainstream than is "socialism." It, too, is condemned to irrelevance; and just as the Left-wingers, out of sheer frustration, will find themselves uttering the kind of anti-American sentiments usually reserved for *Pravda*, so the Right-wingers discover themselves flirting willy-nilly with crackpot economics or anti-Semitism.

THE BASIC FACT of American political thought is that, for a century and a half, it has been dominated by a liberal orthodoxy so massive, and yet so flexible, that one can escape from it only at the risk of severe mental and psychological unbalance. This orthodoxy is not easy to define in a summary way, but I should say that its salient characteristics are: (1) it is uninhibitedly committed to modernity—that is, to the perpetual transformation of society by scientific and technological innovation; and (2) it defines the "pursuit of happiness" in utterly non-political terms—which is to say, its politics are ordinarily subservient to the private individual's private satisfactions. These two fundamental American theses, between them, effectively make both "conservatism" (with its pathos of the past) and "socialism" (with its quest for community) foreign elements in the body politic—exotic imports to a country big enough for them to get lost in. They also make American politics a great bore for the American intellectual. As is bound to be the case under any such orthodoxy, political journalism is approved, but anything resembling political theory—any speculation on first principles—is suspect; selfless devotion to the common good is applauded, but only so long as it is the common conception of the common good—selfless devotion to an uncommon idea of the common good is a sign of "extremism." All of which means that, in the American democracy, the intellectual who develops passionate convictions or far-reaching ideas about politics will come up against a wall of blank incomprehension and will probably veer off into eccentricity.

THIS IS NOT GOOD FOR THE INTELLECTUALS; and it is not good for America either. For when, as now, our nation faces a challenge, not only to its existence but to the very principles of its existence, it finds itself dangerously inarticulate. The comic efforts to overcome this inarticulateness—through a Presidential commission on "national goals," or prize essays that would define our "national purpose," or soppy generalities about "the American way of life"—all these only emphasise the difficulty. America is not in need of any ideology to set up against Marxism; God forbid that it should ever fabricate, or be dominated by one. But it is in need of political (one might even say philosophical) self-consciousness—it needs to know itself, to understand itself, to have a detached insight into itself as a democracy and an imperial power. The typical journalistic or quasi-sociological exposé, whatever its particular merits, does not really help. In the end it becomes a mere titillation, a self-reproach which is a source of self-satisfaction: Messrs. C. Wright Mills and Vance Packard are a part of the American entertainment industry, not of American politics. Nor is "socialist" or "conservative" rhetoric-mongering of much use. It seems singularly futile to try to transplant these doctrines—echoes of a history America has never experienced, offshoots of a class conflict America has never known—to our shores just when they are beginning to wither away in their homelands.

It is clear, or ought to be, that unquestioning acceptance of the American liberal orthodoxy cannot survive the end of American isolation. We now, for the first time, have to explain ourselves to a world that does not accept us on our own terms. To do this, we shall have to explain ourselves to ourselves. This is infinitely harder than indulging in petulant, wilful criticism; and it is, oddly enough, about as un-American as un-American can be.

Irving Kristol

Strachey's Cry

JOHN STRACHEY, it seems to me, misses the chief interest and point of the literature of ex-Communism when he insists on accepting Communist pretensions to rationality. For the surprising fact—of concern to the clinician as well as the political theorist—is that ex-Communism usually represents not a "retreat from rationalism" [ENCOUNTER, Nov. and Dec.] but a passage from one form of Romanticism to another.